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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PANAMA 002362

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SUBJECT: PANAMA FOREIGN MINISTER MEETS AMBASSADOR WATT

REF: A. PANAMA 2273

[B](#). PANAMA 2289

Classified By: AMBASSADOR LINDA WATT FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a September 7 meeting with Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis Navarro, Ambassador Watt discussed the Secretary's recent visit to Panama and President Torrijos' travel plans to the UN General Assembly in New York. The Ambassador also discussed ways Panama could contribute to the corruption case of former Nicaraguan President Aleman, proposed Uighur resettlement, Panama's disrupted relations with Cuba and Venezuela, student visas, a U.S. Desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and Panama's opposition to whaling. End Summary

Secretary Powell's Visit

[1](#)2. (SBU) Accompanied by acting DCM, the Ambassador congratulated Foreign Minister Lewis September 7 on Secretary Powell's successful September 1 visit to Panama and highlighted the Secretary's positive reaction to President Torrijos' inaugural address. She also shared the Secretary's impression of Panama's potential for achieving the goals -- pension reform, anti-corruption, economic growth, and Canal expansion) set out by President Torrijos. Lewis shared the positive evaluation of the Secretary's visit and expressed appreciation for his attendance.

Foreign Minister's Upcoming U.S. Travel

[1](#)3. (SBU) Foreign Minister Lewis noted that President Torrijos and he would travel to New York for the U.N. General Assembly in September and they are planning to attend a reception hosted by President Bush. Lewis added that he will be available for bilateral meetings in Washington if necessary, as he also plans to attend the swearing-in of Panama's new Permanent Representative to the OAS. (NOTE: After the meeting, the Torrijos administration announced the appointment of former President Aristides Royo (1978-82) to the OAS seat. END NOTE.)

Torrijos Visit to Washington

[1](#)4. (SBU) Recognizing that the U.S. Presidential election would present some complications, the Foreign Minister highlighted President Torrijos' interest in an early visit to Washington to meet President Bush to discuss matters of mutual interest, such as Canal Expansion, investment opportunities, and political and security cooperation.

Agreement Request

[1](#)5. (SBU) Foreign Minister Lewis presented Panama's formal request for Agreement for Ambassador-designate Humbert, noting that this was the first agreement request made by the Torrijos government. Ambassador Watt promised to forward the request to Washington and to process it as quickly as possible. (see Reftel A.)

Nicaraguan Ex-President Aleman Corruption Case

16. (C) The Ambassador followed up on A/S Noriega's discussions during the Secretary's visit and provided additional background material on the corruption case pending in Panama against Nicaraguan ex-President Aleman. The Ambassador urged Panama to move forward with its case against Aleman, noting that it would send a strong signal of Panama's interest in fighting corruption. Lewis said that President Torrijos had already told him that he wanted to pursue the matter and do "everything Panama could" in that regard. The Ambassador and Foreign Minister agreed that on the need to convince Attorney General Sossa to move ahead. Foreign Minister Lewis added that the Torrijos Government was following closely a developing corruption case involving Costa Rica's former President and another case involving Banco Nacion, an Argentine-owned bank. With regard to the latter, the Foreign Minister expressed his concern about corruption allegations involving Panama's judicial system, in particular the Supreme Court.

Uighur Resettlement

17. (C) The Ambassador asked the Foreign Minister for an update on Panama's thinking regarding possible resettlement of Uighur detainees from Guantanamo Bay, which she had discussed with him previously. The Foreign Minister candidly replied that it would be difficult for Panama to agree to accept those individuals given the lingering controversy over former President Moscoso's pardon of the four Cubans accused of plotting to assassinate Cuban President Castro. He said that in his view accepting the Uighurs would not be good for either Panama or the U.S. at this time. He feared that resettlement of the Uighurs would be seen as incompatible with the strong stand against terrorism that had been expressed by the Torrijos government in the wake of those pardons. The Foreign Minister said he hoped the USG would understand that position. (See Reftel B.)

Relations with Cuba and Venezuela

18. (C) The Foreign Minister noted that he would make no more public comments about re-establishing relations with Cuba in the wake of the pardons. He added that the Torrijos administration had done a good job of distancing itself and the USG from Moscoso's decision to pardon the four individuals. At the same time, relations with Venezuela were back on track, and Panama was preparing an agreement request for its Ambassador-designate to Caracas.

Student Visas

19. (SBU) The Ambassador encouraged Lewis to consider extending the validity of visas issued to American students in Panama. Reciprocally, the USG would be able to consider extending visa validity for Panamanians studying in the U.S. Lewis, a Georgetown University grad whose son studies at Georgetown, said he had already begun working on this and would follow up with concerned GOP agencies. The Ambassador and Foreign Minister agreed that it would be beneficial to increase the number of U.S. students in Panama.

Central America Chief of Mission Meeting

10. (SBU) Lewis reiterated his and President Torrijos' interest in meeting with participants in the upcoming CentAm Chiefs of Mission meeting. He offered full cooperation in ensuring the success of the meeting.

U.S. Desk at MFA

11. (SBU) Lewis said he would establish a United States Desk at the MFA, dedicated to responding to routine Embassy requests (such as diplomatic notes, extradition requests, etc.) The Ambassador noted that she wanted to establish smooth working relationships between the Embassy and the Ministry but not overburden the Foreign Minister.

Whaling Issue

12. (SBU) Foreign Minister Lewis said that Panama's opposition to whale hunting was "non-negotiable." He cited it as an example of the need for consistency in Panama's foreign and domestic policy. Since Panama is trying to encourage tourism in the Bay of Panama (a breeding ground for whales) it would be inconsistent to encourage/allow hunting.

Relations with the Dominican Republic

13. (SBU) Lewis said that the meetings between Torrijos officials and the Dominican Republic delegation at the September 1 inauguration had gone very well. The Ambassador and Foreign Minister agreed that the two new governments shared similar challenges and also had much in common that could be a basis for collaboration.

Parlacen

14. (SBU) Foreign Minister Lewis told the Ambassador that Parlacen is ineffective and very expensive but contained "all the vices" for Panamanians, including immunity for former officials. He said that other Central American countries were also critical of Parlacen, with the exception of El Salvador, which saw the body as providing space for the political opposition. While the Torrijos Administration would consider proposals to reform Parlacen, Lewis thought major changes during the next five years are unlikely.

Challenges of New Government

15. (SBU) The Foreign Minister said that the Torrijos Administration is confronting the challenges of governing and the need to maintain fiscal discipline. He estimated that the Moscoso government had added 50,000 government jobs in the past five years. Within the Foreign Ministry alone, he estimated 25% of the payroll was in excess of requirements. He vowed to cut those positions despite the political pressures to provide as many jobs as possible to party supporters.

Priorities for U.S. Assistance

16. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador, Lewis predicted that Minister of Government and Justice Hector Aleman would be a good friend to the U.S. The Foreign Minister encouraged the Embassy to work closely with Aleman and supported an early Aleman visit to Washington. He expressed interest in maximizing the effectiveness of USG assistance programs targeted at the Panamanian Public Forces and shared the Ambassador's desire for complementarity between U.S. and Panamanian resources devoted to security.

ILEA

17. (SBU) With regard to the proposed International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) for Central America, the Foreign Minister said he thought the best way forward would be for the academy to fall under the umbrella of the Ciudad del Saber (City of Knowledge). The Ambassador said that the ILEA issue was currently on hold, but promised to keep this in mind. The Ambassador and Foreign Minister agreed that the Ciudad del Saber could be more effective if it were better focused and marketed.

118. (C) Comment: This was VP/Foreign Minister Lewis' first bilateral courtesy call, taking place prior to his formal greeting to the diplomatic corps on September 10. Throughout the tour d'horizon, Lewis emphasized the desire of President Torrijos to foster a very close and collaborative relationship with the United States. Reflecting that commitment, Lewis joined the Ambassador's 9/13 courtesy call to the Minister of Government and Justice and met separately with Embassy officers for a briefing on the nuts and bolts of extradition requests, force protection, and related issues. He intends to speak frankly and asks the same of us. Lewis will capitalize on his family's business and political connections in Washington to promote Panama's interests. We expect a more dynamic, well-run, and coherent foreign ministry and foreign policy under his direction.

WATT